



Photo by Dudley Harris

Musings of An Armor Officer

by Major Mark Salas

I have spent some time in armor battalions and more than my fair share of time at combat training centers. I have talked to a lot of armor leaders and seen a lot of units in action at our training centers. These experiences have led me to support some of our techniques and question others. This article is a compilation of thoughts and ideas for improvement. Some of them smack of heresy/out-of-the-box thinking, but they all should be good food for thought. As professionals, we should look at the way we do things to improve. Not “rocking the boat” or suggesting room for improvement leads to turgid, moribund organizations that fail under duress (French army 1919–1940).

The Training Center Experience

The training centers are the best things for the armored force. There is no substitute for getting out on the ground and maneuvering large forces. However, training concepts needs to be relooked to get the most bang for the buck.

There are several potential fixes to improve the quality/endstate of training. The following proposals can be used as stand-alone or combined solutions.

Do away with permanent opposing forces (OPFOR). Sound pretty radical? Think about it — three mechanized, permanent OPFOR battalions that will never deploy waste training time and dollars. The intent of a world-class OPFOR is to make training at training centers as rigorous as possible. Often times, this rigorous training takes the form of a baby

seal hunt as hopelessly overmatched blue forces (BLUFOR) units stumble from clubbing to clubbing. Many crews do not cross line of departure (LD) because they fall victim to artillery, air strikes, chemicals, partisans, and family of scatterable mines (FASCAM). Sound familiar?

Why not design rotations in which a brigade deploys with all three battalions and then “round robin” OPFOR duties? For the National Training Center (NTC), there would be a requirement for another task force equipment set. For the Combat Maneuver Training Center (CMTC), there would be no change. There would be no requirement for an OPFOR surrogate vehicle, as the designated OPFOR battalion would strap on visual modifications such as 55-gallon drums, camouflage nets, and red stars.

My best training was as an OPFOR platoon leader in the nonpermanent OPFOR at the CMTC in the late '80s, early '90s. We had minimal observer controller (OC) coverage and our chain of command took the opportunity to conduct real training. Another idea might be allowing National Guard units to rotate in as OPFOR when active duty units arrive. This would require some cadre at the operations group level to handle command and control and base support. There would be a need for contract maintenance support. The net result is that the total (deployable) force would conduct all CTC training. There is a dollar cost; however, there would be 2,000 plus soldiers available for the force if the heavy OPFOR were eliminated.

Gradually ramp up the OPFOR. Most units that currently deploy to our training

centers are not prepared for the training event. They need time to get out on the ground and refresh/reinforce their tactical skills. Why not make the first task force attack against a reinforced platoon? Why not make the first task force meeting engagement against a reinforced company? This allows units to survive long enough to move, shoot, and communicate. You don't learn to box by stepping in the ring with Mike Tyson. What is the utility of conducting an attack that gets destroyed in the OPFOR security zone? Ask yourself if the level of training for actions on the objective increased or decreased since the implementation of the CTC system. I can state unequivocally that the overwhelming majority of our units do not make it to the objective during an entire rotation. Why not design attacks to get onto the objective after a breach and then defend against a counterattack? Most units do not live long enough to see what right looks like. They start out behind the power curve with their entry-level training and never recover.

An interesting study would be to see how long individual vehicles stay alive across the LD during a 2-week rotation. We may be surprised to find that the average crew spends five to six hours alive across the LD or defending during their entire capstone training event. I am convinced that the repeated beatings we suffer at our training centers make us more risk averse and cause us to overestimate our enemies. On the other hand, we do know how to take a beating.

Reduce OPFOR artillery and increase BLUFOR artillery. I would submit there

is minimal training value in being killed by artillery at or near the LD or immediately on defend-no-later-than time. Conversely, we are underwhelmed with the amount of BLUFOR artillery available. Look at historical experiences. American artillery gets us onto the objective; where we are defeated is in actions on the objective when the enemy hugs our belt buckle. In addition, commanders and staffs are not forced to manage the amount of firepower/artillery that we traditionally take to the fight. Destroying BLUFOR units repeatedly with notional artillery in the security zone is not effective training.

Spend less time prepping and more time executing. Lethal platoons are the key to winning engagements and therefore battles. We spend an inordinate amount of time talking about it. Why not give a unit their mission set before the deployment and let them knock out their orders process at home station? Once the unit arrives, they can be given a fragmentary order (FRAGO) that forces them to refine their order and complete an abbreviated MDMP. Sound like combat? Also, the movement-to-contact mission should have a fixed LD, recock, and second LD time briefed. For example, units would LD at 0630 hours, fight without casualty evacuation until 0900 hours, recock/rekey, and LD again at 1100 hours. Everyone would know that a recock is a given, and there would be no hesitation as units wait on decisions by senior trainers to recock. Precombat inspections and rehearsals are good training, and can be accomplished at home station. When you deploy to a combat training center, you should spend most of your time in the turret on the radio and not in an after-action review or orders process. Training the MDMP and maneuver should not be mutually exclusive events; the reality of the situation is that they are.

The "Tactical Decisionmaking Process"

"A good plan now is better than a perfect plan too late."

— General George S. Patton

How many times have you received a tactical order that was an uncoordinated, cut-and-paste paperweight? How many times have you gone to a rehearsal and a wargame developed? How many times have you heard a commander say, "That's not what I want," during an orders brief?

The MDMP is broke. It does not work in tactical units. There, I said it — it is counterintuitive, has too many steps and normally does not result in a coherent product. Consider these questions:

- Does the MDMP get more or less effective when you are tired?
- Does the MDMP get more or less effective with new personnel?
- Does the MDMP get more or less effective with a chaotic situation?

Sound like combat? If no plan survives first contact then why do we exhaust ourselves as slaves to a process that is only going to result in a less effective product when we go to war? Fine, if I have 6 months to plan the invasion of Normandy, then I would use the MDMP. If I have 24 hours to plan a brigade attack, then I am going to time constrain the hell out of the MDMP.

Brigades and below should adopt a process that results in a more coherent product, provides more time to supervise preparation, and does not exhaust staffs — for lack of a better term, the "tactical decisionmaking process" (TDMP). TDMP is a formalization of a process that is already occurring in units; namely, doing the MDMP faster. The TDMP has five steps:

- Commander and staff read order and write down essential tasks = 1½ hours. The commander and staff conduct mission analysis. There is no brief to follow.

The commander already read the order. Issue warning order (WARNO) one.

- Commander develops scheme of maneuver and mission = 30 minutes. The commander develops a rough scheme of maneuver using a map and alcohol pens. No need for two courses of action — use the commander's course of action. The commander develops the scheme of maneuver, no need to brief anyone about it. While the commander is developing a scheme of maneuver, the staff preps the wargame board.

- Commander, staff, and subordinate commanders conduct wargame/rehearsal and issue orders = 3 hours. Start with a 10-minute overview brief of the area of operation and mission. There is only a brief overview of enemy forces — only hard data. Save the doctrinal templates for home station officer professional developments. The commander, staff, and subordinate commanders then conduct a wargame/rehearsal. During this wargame/rehearsal, the commander issues intent and guidance and takes feedback from subordinate commanders. The commander concludes step three with direct verbal orders to his subordinates on what he wants them to do. Subordinate commanders ask questions. The result of this is the decision support matrix, reconnaissance



Photo by SPC Mason Lowery

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and surveillance matrix, and the combat service support matrix. Issue WARNO two.

- Staffs produce supporting matrices and graphics = 2 hours. Staffs clean up their products and reproduce them.

- Supporting matrices sent to subordinate units. Products issued to subordinate units. Commander supervises subordinate units.

The advantages of TDMP are clear. Less time is spent preparing an order that will have marginal benefit and the staff can spend more time coordinating and assisting subordinate units. There is only one brief. The commander is the key player in TDMP. If the plan is one man's idea, it will be more coherent and coordinated. All players will be better rested and prepared for execution. Savage execution is the key to success in the chaos of war. During the 3-hour period with the commander during the wargame/rehearsal, subordinate commanders will have ample time to get guidance, ask questions, and recommend solutions to tactical problems. Subordinate commanders will partially own the plan. Staffs can be smaller. Parts of MDMP are used in TDMP, which brings institutional knowledge on procedure.

Armor Branch vs. Military Intelligence

What is the second largest branch in the Army? Field artillery? Quartermaster? If you said military intelligence (MI), you are correct. Forty years ago MI was not a branch — now they rank second in numbers only to infantry. Isn't this a problem? When was the last time a MI unit killed anything? Combat arms should take tactical intelligence from MI and give it back to the tactical intelligence professionals.

Tactical intelligence officers should become a career track. This can be accomplished by training the battalion intelligence coordinator (BIC), the battalion S2, and brigade S2 during a 2-week school on available intelligence systems and briefing formats for each job. Career progression would be: platoon leader; XO/scout platoon leader; BIC; battalion S2; company commander; brigade S2; and battalion S3/XO. Another option might be sharp, combat arms staff sergeants, ad-



An M1A1 Abrams tank stands guard in front of the Baghdad Convention Center.

vanced noncommissioned officers course honor graduates, warrant officer (WO) course graduates, platoon leader/WO1, BIC/WO2; battalion S2/WO3; and brigade S2/WO4. Either way, the net result would be intelligence officers in maneuver battalions who have on-the-ground experience in tactical operations. This would allow the MI branch to focus on higher-level intelligence and provide more combat arms officers in tactical units.

Digital and Military Operations in Urban Terrain (MOUT)

As a military profession, we are confused about the next war. On one hand, we read that the world is becoming increasingly urbanized and more wars will take place in urban settings. On the other hand, we see the Army's fascination with digitization. The Marines are preaching that the next war will be fought and won in urban centers. The Army's heavy forces are spending a lot of money preparing to win a war that will look like an NTC rotation. The common operating environment is changing the complexion of a rotation, but not the substance. Does digital technology work in large urban areas? Is anyone experimenting?

Because we are preparing for a massed armored war, we do limit training with infantry dismounts in urban terrain. For

instance, the M1A2 — I would have loved to have this tank back in the days of the Fulda Gap, but the 8th Guards Tank Army is not coming. This multi-million-dollar tank can download more information than the average tank commander can handle but does not even have an external radio/telephone. Your average armor officer would be at a loss on how to use dismounts effectively in a MOUT situation. We need to be prepared to fight a people of character in a close, urban fight. Our Army has done a lot of MOUT in the past century, and we need to have the experience, training and mental dexterity to do it again.

Training

We have made training too difficult. Here is an example list of assets needed to conduct a to-standard platoon simulated training exercise lane:

1. OPFOR.
2. Sandtable.
3. OCs.
4. After-action review tent with generator, light set, stove, and warm/cool beverages.
5. Firemarkers with pyrotechnics.
6. MILES with blanks.
7. Scenario and 30-page task force OPORD with annexes and overlays.
8. Hot chow.
9. Doctrinal minefields, fighting positions, and wire.
10. Task force tactical operations center deployed.
11. A headquarters and headquarters company support element deployed.

Our training doctrine has been combined with the 8-step training method to create a mini combat training center every time we roll out the back gate. Instead of training, we are attempting to "teach the test." Training is so excruciatingly painful and expensive to conduct to standard, most units miss or avoid opportunities to conduct training at all.

Somewhere after creating the combat training centers, we lost the ability/men-

tal dexterity to conduct training exercises without troops (TEWT). One of my best training experiences was during a TEWT, traveling in a high mobility, multipurpose wheeled vehicle (HMMWV), and maneuvering through our general defense plan. The company commander briefed an operations order and handed out an overlay that included designated roads as minefields. The commander was in his HMMWV with the fire support team, the XO was in the first sergeant's HMMWV, and all the platoon tank commanders were in borrowed four-door HMMWVs. We then maneuvered across the German countryside, calling in checkpoints, occupying battle positions, and breaching minefields. We learned how to navigate, use terrain, talk on the radio, and maneuver as part of a company. Every time we reached an objective, we would occupy an assembly area that was identified on the move and have an informal after-action review. Required support included a tank of gas, a box of meals ready to eat per truck, and water. The event was not "leveraged" into a combat service support training event or some sort of brigade tactical exercise. It focused on platoons moving and commu-

nicating. It was an outstanding training event. Our Army could use more of these events.

Company TEWTs could be expanded into task force TEWTs by placing platoon leaders and first sergeants in M113s and maneuvering full up with scout platoons and mortar platoons, while XOs and above are in HMMWVs. The platoon tracks could occasionally kick out four sandbags tied together as casualties that the first sergeant could take back to the battalion aid station. A task force could roll to the field and maneuver all day for the operational tempo cost of 10 HMMWVs, 14 M113s and 5 M577s. What about the OPFOR? You don't need them.

Get systems in place and let people learn their jobs before they get killed at LD. Our current training technique of the mini combat training center allows crews to be killed repeatedly without ever reaching the objective. We have to train people how to think, use terrain, and communicate before we put them to a real test, if we expect them to be successful.

What about OCs? Don't need them either. The chain of command are smart guys with a breadth of experience and are more than capable of OCing their subordinates. Units should not have to fight through an entangled bureaucracy of overhead and requirements to train. TEWTs allow units to "crawl" cheaply, with an opportunity for multiple iterations. Wars are won with savage execution by tactical units. The chain of command should keep in mind that the higher the level of training, the less focus will go to platoons. Simplify events and focus on the killers.



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